THE BEGINNINGS OF ENGLISH PROTESTANTISM

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Evangelical conversion in the reign of Henry VIII

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I

If the early Reformation in England was more than merely an 'act of state', then integral to the process was a pattern of individual religious conversions. Beginning in the reign of Henry VIII, significant numbers of men and women who had been brought up with the old faith turned their backs on aspects of traditional devotion, and embraced a new set of understandings about what was essential in the exercise of Christian belief. Naturally enough, this is a theme which has been touched on in many individual biographies, national surveys and regional studies. Yet it is remarkable that to date there has been little or no attempt to explore the phenomenon of evangelical conversion in the early Tudor period in any systematic or broadly thematic way.[1]

In any age religious conversion is a particularly intangible and elusive historical topic, which involves complex definitional and evidential problems. What do we mean when we say people 'convert' or 'are converted'? Does this signify an intellectual process, the substitution of new ideas and doctrinal propositions for repudiated old ones? An institutional or social one, the crossing from one ecclesiastical body or network of believers to another? Or a more intimate and psychological kind of transformation, involving moral renewal and reordered personal priorities? None of these is, of course, mutually exclusive. The sources for studying conversion are particularly problematic. Only the convert's own account, a so-called 'conversion narrative', is likely to bring us close to the inner meanings and logic of the event, but these by definition are written

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[1] There are some suggestive general remarks in Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), 119–21; Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993), 189–90; Alec Ryrie, 'English evangelical reformers in the last years of Henry VIII', D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford (2000), 156–60, 187–8. F. W. Bullock, *Evangelical Conversion in Great Britain 1516–1695* (St Leonards on Sea, 1966) is a rather sketchy account intended to provide 'a notable testimony to the manifold workings of the spirit of God' (viii).

after the occurrences they describe, and are likely to involve to varying extents the reordering and reshaping of experience in the light of subsequent understanding and intention. Autobiography is always a form of fiction, and historians of the sixteenth century have now enjoyed sufficient acquaintance with the subtleties of 'rhetorics of life-writing' and 'renaissance self-fashioning' not to take at face value their subjects' own versions of their personal history.[2] These difficulties are exacerbated in studying conversion in the early sixteenth century. Later studies of early modern conversion, 'puritan' and Catholic, can draw on the burgeoning evidence of spiritual diaries, personal correspondence and printed apologia.[3] But hardly any full-blooded conversion narratives survive for the pre-Elizabethan period in England, leaving only scraps of biography and (frequently stylised) autobiography tucked away in a range of printed and manuscript sources. It is striking that modern biographers of many of the leading English reformers of the first generation have found considerable difficulty in attempting to date with any precision at all when it was that their subjects converted from traditional Catholicism.[4] In making the focus of this essay the origins of the evangelical movement in the reign of Henry VIII, the problems are intensified further, for the people identified in a classic study as 'England's earliest Protestants' were not Protestants at all.[5] That is, they would not have applied to themselves a term which was not recognised in a domestic context before the reign of Edward VI, and not universally employed until later even than that.[6] The subject of this discussion is therefore not 'conversion to Protestantism', a phrase which connotes a much greater clarity of confessional categorisation than is appropriate for the period. Following the lead of recent scholarship, 'evangelical' will be employed as the least-worst label for bringing together a variety of forms of early sixteenth-century heterodoxy.[7] Nonetheless, I will contend that it is

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[2] *The Rhetoric of Life Writing*, ed. T. F. Mayer and D. R. Woolf (Ann Arbor, 1995); S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago and London, 1980).

[3] M. Questier, *Conversion, Politics and Religion in England, 1580–1625* (Cambridge, 1996); N. Petit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (New Haven, 1966); P. Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century* (1969); P. Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: the Beginning of American Expression* (Cambridge, 1983).

[4] J. Ridley, *Nicholas Ridley* (1957), 48; A. G. Chester, *Hugh Latimer: Apostle to the English* (Philadelpha, 1954), ch. 3; L. P. Fairfield, *John Bale: Mythmaker for the English Reformation* (West Lafayette, IN, 1976), 33–5; David Daniell, *William Tyndale* (New Haven and London, 1994), 38–40; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: a Life* (New Haven and London, 1996), chs. 2–3.

[5] W. A. Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants 1520–1535* (New Haven and London, 1964).

[6] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (1999), 2.

[7] G. Walker, *Persuasive Fictions: Faction, Faith and Political Culture in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Aldershot, 1996), 136–7; M. Dowling, *Humanism in the Age of Henry VIII* (1986), 'Note and Acknowledgements'.

legitimate to identify in Henry's reign a meaningful phenomenon we can call 'evangelical conversion', with generic features and patterns which contemporaries were able to recognise, and which proved in the end more significant than the discrepancies. The intention is not so much to attempt to explain why English men and women, individually or collectively, became evangelicals, but rather to suggest a set of approaches to the concept of conversion itself, as its protagonists appear to have understood it.

There is an irony, albeit a highly appropriate one, in the fact that the early evangelical conversion experience historians think they know most about is that of Martin Luther himself. Luther's conversion may or may not be the key causal element in the development of the European Reformation, but it is worth considering briefly at the outset here for the light it sheds on the problems and potential of studying the phenomenon in its English context. Luther described his conversion in a preface to the first volume of his complete Latin works (1545), a passage generally referred to as 'the autobiographical fragment'. An Augustinian friar of the strict observance, Luther found himself weighed down with a sense of sin, and an inability to believe that God could or would be content with the works of satisfaction he had long undertaken. But studying in the tower room of the Augustinian house in Wittenberg he underwent a moment of breakthrough and illumination, the so-called 'tower experience' (*Turmerlebnis*). After repeated reflection on the writings of St Paul, he at last felt he understood the importance of a sentence in Romans 1: 17, 'the righteous shall live by faith'. Men's own 'good works' were worthless in the sight of God, who accepted them as 'justified' on account of their faith alone: 'At this I felt myself straightway born afresh and to have entered through the open gates into paradise itself.'[8]

Here we seem to have the template for explaining both why and how sixteenth-century people came to turn their backs on the faith of their parents, and indeed there are English cases which appear to present close similarities to the Luther model. The Cambridge scholar Thomas Bilney, burned as a relapsed heretic in 1531, wrote to Bishop Tunstall in the course of his trial recounting how he had found no peace of mind in repeated recourse to fasting, pardons and masses. But in Erasmus's New

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[8] *Martin Luther*, ed. E. G. Rupp and B. Drewery (1970), 5–6. Among the plethora of English-language Luther scholarship, I have found the following most effective in crystallising the issues and controversies: H. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. E. Walliser-Schwarzbart (1993), 151–74; S. Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250–1550* (New Haven and London, 1980), 229–30; A. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1988), 73–5.

Testament he had chanced upon a passage in 1 Timothy 1: 15, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief':

> this one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness.

Thereafter he also understood that it was necessary to condemn dependence upon 'works of man's righteousness'.[9] An apparently similar case of excessive 'scrupulosity' resolved by accepting justification by faith is that of Thomas More's son-in-law, William Roper, as recounted in Nicholas Harpsfield's life of More. Roper's fall into heresy 'did grow of a scruple of his own conscience'; he 'daily did use immoderate fasting and many prayers . . . thinking God therewith never to be pleased'. With such exercises he reportedly 'did weary himself even *usque ad taedium* [even to exhaustion]' until through his contacts with the German merchants of the Steelyard he became acquainted with Luther's works, and became convinced 'that faith only did justify, that the works of man did nothing profit'.[10]

Fascinating as these accounts are, they should not be taken absolutely at face value, still less as self-evidently normative for the motives and processes of evangelical conversion.[11] It has been argued that Bilney's apparently frank autobiographical narrative was in fact a carefully constructed exculpatory strategy, designed to appeal to the humanist sympathies of Tunstall.[12] Though Harpsfield's account most likely drew directly on Roper's own reminiscences, its pivotal figure is Thomas More, rescuer of his son-in-law from erroneous ways.[13] The narrative is shaped around this happy conclusion, and one suspects that the prominence in it of Luther's works is to underscore the achievements of More as Luther's principal English opponent.

Luther's own 'autobiographical fragment' is problematic in all sorts of ways. In common with other conversion acounts of this period, it is thin on circumstantial detail; no year is provided for the tower experience, which has been variously dated by historians. Further, scholars have

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[9] *AM*, 1005.

[10] Nicholas Harpsfield, *The life and death of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E. V. Hitchcock and R. W. Chambers, EETS 186 (1932), 84–6.

[11] See here the remark of E. G. Rupp in his *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge, 1947), 160, that Luther's 'discovery' was 'not like some scientific invention, a theological spinning jenny to be passed round, adapted, improved and finally patented by others'.

[12] Walker, *Persuasive Fictions*, 160–2.   [13] R. Marius, *Thomas More* (1984), xvi–xvii.

been sceptical about what Luther himself represents as a single dramatic moment of discovery, finding in his sermons over the period 1513–18 a number of distinct theological advances and 'breakthroughs'.[14] Whether we should see Luther's moment of catharsis as primarily an intellectual or an emotional one is another point at issue. A. G. Dickens has argued that Luther's *Turmerlebnis* was not a 'religious experience' as we might apply the term to either medieval mystics or modern Protestant revivalists; rather it 'claimed to be a "moment of truth" in a more literal and obvious sense. Luther was not concerned to achieve a revelation from within his own emotional resources.'[15] Alister McGrath by contrast insists that Luther's concern with salvation and righteousness 'shows a strongly existential dimension' and was no mere theological problem.[16] 'Conversion narratives' bring out more strongly than almost any other biographical source a temptation on the part of some historians to psychologise their subjects.[17] In his famous study of 'young man Luther', the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson remarked on the significance of Luther's conversion experience taking place when the reformer was in his early thirties, 'an important age for gifted people with a delayed identity crisis'.[18] More recently, the historian Richard Marius has related Luther's experience to 'the psychological self-examination that made so many in the later Middle Ages scrutinise their own hearts, test their own emotions, crawl dismally on all fours through the dark sewers of their hidden selves'.[19]

Enough has been said, I think, to establish that the language and structure of conversion narratives is complex, and lends itself to deconstruction of various kinds. But there may be limited utility here in attempting to strip back the rhetoric and tropes to uncover a putative 'real' motivation on the part of converts. Excessively reductionist approaches to a phenomenon like religious conversion run the risk of turning it into a mere reflection of the concerns of our own society,

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[14] Oberman, *Luther*, 151–74.

[15] A. G. Dickens, *Martin Luther and the Reformation* (1967), 30.

[16] McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 73.

[17] Seminal in this respect are the two lectures on conversion by the nineteenth-century American philosopher William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. F. H. Burkhardt (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 157 ff. James interpreted conversion in psychoanalytical terms as the process 'by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities'. For a survey of the literature on the psychological/psychoanalytical approach to writing about conversion (and some caveats), see L. R. Rambo, 'Current Research on Religious Conversion', *Religious Studies Review* 8 (1982), 146–59.

[18] E. H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (paperback edition, 1962), 201.

[19] Marius, *More*, 320.

and conversion demands to be understood on its own terms, rather than rationalised or explained away.[20] In what follows the emphasis will be on the construction of a concept or idea of conversion among early English evangelicals; on seeking to understand how it was patterned and represented, to the self and to others; on the sources of its language, imagery and internal structure; and on what such an investigation may have to tell us about 'the beginnings of English Protestantism'.

<div align="center">II</div>

A final glance at the case of Martin Luther should remind us of an important fact about conversion in the early Tudor period: neither the word nor the range of meanings it might signify originated with the evangelical protest against Rome. At the time of the tower experience, Luther had already undergone one dramatic religious conversion: his decision to become a monk.[21] 'Conversion' was a term widely used in later medieval England to evoke that 'death to the world' involved in the transformation from the secular to the religious life. The Yorkshire hermit Richard Rolle, for example, described a demonic temptation that had come to him 'in the beginning of my conversion'; and the revelation of purgatory and paradise to an anonymous monk of Evesham (printed 1482) came to him after a sickness suffered 'about the beginning of his conversion'.[22] More prosaically, the first English translation of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* admonished new religious, 'in the beginning of thy conversion thou keep thy cell and dwell well therin'.[23] Conversion was thus hardly a new concept to the many English evangelicals who, as Richard Rex shows elsewhere in this volume, emerged from the ranks of the regular clergy.

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[20] The most convincing attempt to ascribe a general underlying pattern to early evangelical conversion is Susan Brigden's suggestive exploration of the links between support for the Reformation and youthful protest against authority: 'Youth and the English Reformation', *Past and Present* 95 (1982), 37–67. I have not attempted to pursue this theme further, largely because it does not appear prominently in the accounts of evangelicals themselves, who believed that 'men are called to repentaunce, some in youth, some in myddle age, and some in olde age'. See N. Wyse, *A consolacyon for chrysten people to repayre agayn the lordes temple* (1538), E1r.

[21] In later years he ascribed this decision to a vow made to St Anna when praying for protection during a thunderstorm: Rupp and Drewery, *Martin Luther*, 2.

[22] Richard Rolle, *English Prose Treatises*, ed. G. G. Perry, EETS 20 (1866), 5; *The Revelation to the Monk of Evesham*, ed. E. Arber (1901), 19.

[23] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, ed. B. J. H. Biggs, EETS 309 (1997), 26.

'Conversion' was also used with reference to Jews and pagans. Late medieval pious texts looked forward to the time when 'jews shall convert', and back to the age when heathens were by holy men 'converted . . . to Christian faith'.[24] The travel narrative of Sir John Mandeville, which appeared in at least four editions in the reign of Henry VII, included the intriguing snippet that the court of the Great Chan contained many Christians, 'converted to good faith by the preaching of religious Christian men'.[25] But the words 'convert/conversion' seem to have been most commonly employed in late medieval sources to indicate not so much an outwardly measurable category change (layman to monk, heathen to Christian) as a turning away from sinfulness to a greater love and service of God. Perhaps the most famous example of this type of convert in fifteenth-century England was the laywoman Margery Kempe, formerly 'a sinful woman' whose confessor could refer to how things stood 'after your conversion'.[26] In a text printed by Caxton in 1484, the devil boasts of his success in acquiring the soul of a dead woman, telling a priest that he had feared he might have 'take[n] her away from me, and converted her with thine long preaching and good examples'.[27] In Stephen Hawes's verse treatise *The Conversyon of Swerers* (1509), swearers are represented as rending the body of Christ, and Christ addresses them: 'Be by me converted/Tear me now no more'.[28] Conversion to and by Jesus is a recurrent theme of *The Imitation of Christ*. The reader is advised to 'learn to despise outward things and to convert thee to inward things'; 'Convert us, Lord, to thee, that we may be meek, kind, and devout.' Like an iron in the fire losing its rust, 'so a man converting himself wholly to God is . . . changed into a new man'.[29]

This understanding of conversion even had its distinct and regular celebration in the Church's calendar, with the institution on 25 January of the festival of the Conversion of St Paul. The homily provided for this feast in the popular sermon collection *The Golden Legend* asked rhetorically, 'Why is Paul's conversion celebrated, while that of other saints is not?' The answer given was that 'no sinner, no matter how grievous his sin,

[24] *Cursor Mundi*, ed. R. Morris, EETS 57–109 (7 vols., 1874–93), iii. 1096, iv. 1279; J. Mirk, *Festial*, ed. T. Erbe, EETS 96 (1905), 217.

[25] *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford, 1967), xiii, 172.

[26] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. B. Meech, EETS 212 (1940), 44.

[27] *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, ed. T. Wright, EETS 33 (1868), 140. See also the reference to Christ's converting common whores and turning them to goodness in Book 16 of Langland's *Piers Ploughman*, ed. J. F. Goodridge (Harmondsworth, 1959), 201.

[28] Stephen Hawes, *The Conversyon of Swerers*, ed. D. Laing (Edinburgh, 1865), A3v.

[29] *The Imitation of Christ*, 40, 45, 77, 115.

can despair of pardon when he sees that Paul, whose fault was so great, afterwards became so much greater in grace'.[30] This was a sentiment with which evangelicals, not noted for their admiration of *The Golden Legend*, could scarcely have found fault.

In fact, if we turn to look for examples of usage of the phrase 'to convert' in evangelical writings of the 1520s and 1530s it is this sense of a penitential reorientation that comes most clearly to the fore. In 1534 Robert Barnes explained that the attack on litigiousness in his famous Cambridge sermon of Christmas Eve 1525 (which marked the start of his public career as a reformer) had been prompted by the behaviour of a grasping churchwarden suing a poverty-stricken executor in pursuit of a small legacy to the church. Barnes had reasoned with him in private to no avail, and spoke in public 'because I had not clearly converted him'.[31] This was not a question of recruitment into an evangelical brotherhood, but of calling him to repentance. The same quality of hardheartedness, though with clearer doctrinal overtones, is alluded to in George Joye's 1531 call to the clergy to allow the scripture in English, and 'to repent you therefore and be converted to God'.[32] In a letter of around 1539, the future archbishop Matthew Parker declared that there was nothing more acceptable to God 'than to convert the hearts of his reasonable creatures in true faith and knowledge unto him'.[33]

In many ways, conversion and repentance were more than linked concepts; they were virtual synonyms which together connoted that 'turning to God' which early Tudor evangelicals thought they were about. In his translation of Luther's *Prologue to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, William Tyndale spoke of the status of a man that 'hath forsaken sin and is converted to put his trust in Christ'.[34] In his own preface, 'W. T. unto the Reader', in the New Testament of 1534, Tyndale explained at some length the philological and theological connections between repentance and conversion, in the process justifying the attack on traditional sacramental practice implicit in his decision to translate the Greek verb *metanoeo* as 'repent' rather than 'do penance':

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[30] J. de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. W. Ryan (2 vols., Princeton, NJ, 1993), i. 119. See also J. Mirk, *Festial*, 52–6.

[31] Robert Barnes, *A supplicacion unto the most gracyous prynce H. the .viii* (1534), F3r. See J. P. Lusardi, 'The Career of Robert Barnes', in Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. L. A. Schuster et al. (New Haven, 1973), 1367–1415.

[32] George Joye, *The letters whyche Iohan Ashwell Priour of Newnham Abbey besydes Bedforde sente secretly to the Byshope of Lyncolne* (Strassburg, 1531), B1v.

[33] Matthew Parker, *Correspondence*, ed. J. Bruce (PS, 1853), 10.

[34] *Tyndale's New Testament*, ed. D. Daniell (New Haven and London, 1989), 211.

Concerning this word repentance or (as they used) penance, the Hebrew hath
in the Old Testament generally *Sob* [shub] turn or be converted. For which
the translation that we take for Saint Jerome's hath most part *converti* to turn
or be converted, and sometime yet *agere penitenciam*. And the Greek in the New
Testament hath perpetually *metanoeo* to turn in the heart and mind, and to come
to the right knowledge, and to a man's right wit again . . . And the very sense and
signification both of the Hebrew and also of the Greek word, is, to be converted
and to turn to God with all the heart, to know his will and to live according to
his laws.[35]

Tyndale went on to argue that this 'conversion or turning if it be un-
feigned' would be accompanied by four elements: confession of sinful-
ness, not to a priest but before God and the congregation; contrition or
sorrowfulness; faith; and satisfaction or the making of amends, not to
God but to those we have offended.[36]

   What most clearly differentiates Tyndale's sense of conversion/
repentance from that of Thomas à Kempis is, of course, the new *theological*
framework through which the concept is mediated. Here it is significant
that the context of the discussion is St Paul's Letter to the Romans, for
Tyndale, following Luther, was convinced that 'the sum and whole cause
of the writings of this epistle, is, to prove that a man is justified by faith
only'.[37] Throughout the reign of Henry VIII, English evangelicals dis-
agreed about a great deal, from eucharistic theology to the possibilities
of compromise with the regime, but the one clear common denomi-
nator, if not the defining element of evangelicalism, was the belief that
men were saved only through their faith in Christ, and not through their
own works. In order to ask what was distinctive about *evangelical* con-
version in the reign of Henry VIII, we need to consider more closely
the symbiotic relationship between an existential or emotional experi-
ence, and the internalisation of a profoundly theological and intellectual
proposition.[38]

   Mature Protestant theology of the sixteenth century, particularly in
its Lutheran manifestation, preserved a fairly clear distinction between
two modes of divine action upon the Christian believer: justification and
sanctification. The former was, in forensic terms, an unmerited verdict of
acquittal, which did not in and of itself effect an inward transformation of

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[35] Ibid., 9–10.   [36] Ibid., 10.   [37] Ibid., 223.
[38] That English Christians other than evangelicals underwent conversion experiences in this pe-
      riod is a point worth bearing in mind: in the early 1530s, for example, the courtiers Sebastian
      Newdigate and Sir John Gage renounced wealth and office to enter the London Charterhouse.
      See Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, 227.

life. In theological jargon, justification was a matter of 'imputation' rather than 'impartation'. Sanctification was the subsequent, and complementary process whereby the Holy Spirit brought about the regeneration of the elect, and a visible and outward holiness which was the consequence not the cause of salvation. Reformers regarded it as a fundamental error of Catholic theologians, pre- and post-Reformation, that they understood by justification a process of 'making righteous', rather than simply 'declaring righteous'.[39]

Yet from the outset the dynamics of the conversion process functioned to blur the boundaries between external judgement and internal change in the subjectivity of the believer. Luther's influential concept of the 'Law/Gospel dichotomy' is a case in point. This was the mechanism through which God brought sinners to an understanding of their condition, and their total dependence on Christ. For English readers a clear account of the doctrine was set out by George Joye in his 1531 printed apologia. The Word of God contains both Law and Gospel, and the function of the former is to instil despair: unable to meet the demands of God's Law, 'a sinful conscience feeleth herself bounden and holden under the power of sin and carried towards damnation'. But hearing and believing the glad tidings of forgiveness through the death of Christ, the sinner 'feeleth his heart eased, comforted & loosed'.[40] The justifying faith which Joye proclaimed here was surely not just a theological principle, but an experimental one, encompassing an *experience* of conversion. Joye fell out spectacularly with William Tyndale over some points of theology, but on this they spoke with one voice.[41] Tyndale urged readers of his *Prologue to Romans* to behold their just damnation in the Law of God, and then to turn their eyes to Christ to see the exceeding mercy of the Father. Further, they were to remember that Christ did not die for their sins so that they could live in them still, 'but that thou shouldest be a new creature and live a new life after the will of God'.[42] Indeed, it seems to have been broadly characteristic of the theology of Tyndale and other early English reformers to emphasise the element of moral transformation

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[39] On these points, see McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 82–4; B. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (2nd edition, 1995), 117–18, 126–7; Rupp, *English Protestant Tradition*, 165–70; C. Trueman, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers 1525–1556* (Oxford, 1994), 56–67. The elaboration of the doctrine of sanctification is particularly associated with Philip Melanchthon.

[40] Joye, *Letters*, A6v-7r.

[41] Specifically, the fate of souls prior to the Last Judgement, Joye charging Tyndale with teaching the error of 'soul sleeping'. See N. T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), 102–11.

[42] *Tyndale's New Testament*, 224.

inherent in justification by faith.[43] In the so-called *Cologne Fragment* of 1525, Tyndale wrote that the hearts of the elect 'begin to wax soft and to melt at the bounteous mercy of God' when salvation through Christ is preached, and five years later in his prologue to the Pentateuch he described the process thus: 'the Spirit entereth the heart, and quickeneth it, and giveth her life, and justifieth her'.[44]

<p style="text-align:center">III</p>

The use of such language in the foundational texts of English reformed theology should give pause for thought. There has been a tendency to perceive the rise of Protestantism in terms of the triumph of intellect over emotion, of the controlled and printed Word over the affective, ritual and mimetic religion of the Middle Ages. It has recently been argued that in the first generation of the English Reformation 'conversions to reforming ideas were on the whole described in intellectual terms', as a progression from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to illumination.[45] It is undeniably the case that 'knowledge' was regarded as a crucial element in the process of conversion. According to his secretary, Ralph Morice, Cranmer once defended himself against a fellow evangelical's charges of overleniency to papists, remarking, 'What will ye have a man do to him that is not yet come to the knowledge of the truth of the gospel?'[46] The London mercer Henry Brinklow remembered in his will the men who 'laboured in the vineyard of the Lord to bring the people . . . to the knowledge of Christ's gospel'.[47] In a letter accompanying the gift of a New Testament to his mother in around 1536, the Yorkshire law student Robert Plumpton sententiously advised her not to worry about her understanding, 'for God will give knowledge to whom he will give knowledge of the Scriptures, as soon to a shepherd as to a priest'. In a subsequent letter he stressed that his admonitions were not designed 'to bring you into any heresies, but to teach you the clear light of God's doctrine'.[48]

This metaphor of enlightenment was a recurrent one in evangelical sources – light from heaven had of course been central to the archetype

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[43] Trueman, *Luther's Legacy*, 89–94. In this, Trueman argues, Tyndale was rather closer to Continental reformers with a humanist background (such as Martin Bucer) than to Luther.
[44] Ibid., 89, 99.   [45] Ryrie, 'English Evangelical Reformers', 187.
[46] *Reformation Narratives*, 246.   [47] Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, 418.
[48] *The Plumpton Correspondence*, ed. T. Stapleton (Camden Society o.s. 4, 1839), 231–2.

of Christian conversion narratives, Paul's experience on the Damascus road. At his trial in 1538, John Lambert acknowledged his debt to the works of Luther 'for by them hath God showed unto me, and also to a huge multitude of others, such light as the deceivable darkness of them . . . that name themselves, but amiss, to be the holy church, cannot abide', and in a treatise of the same year Nicholas Wyse addressed himself to 'ye that are the people of God and have received the light of his gospel'.[49] John Bale described George Joye's conversion in terms of 'the light of truth dawning upon him', and Joye himself called on his enemies to pray God 'that he would illumine your hearts and loose you with the keys of the knowledge of his holy word, and unlock your wits out of this blind ignorance and unbelief'.[50] Writing from exile in Mary's reign, John Olde described his 'first entry into the gospel' of ten or eleven years earlier as a calling out from 'the damnable darkness of Antichrist's iniquity into the true light of Christ's gospel's verity'.[51]

Knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness: these were the states separated by the 'turning to God' that gospellers had identified in themselves and looked for in others. But when they recounted a transformative encounter with the Word of God, evangelicals did not typically do so in terms which spoke only of an intellectual, credal type of conversion. When Henry VIII's last wife, Katherine Parr, wrote of how she had come to know Christ as her saviour, she regarded it as a knowledge 'infused by grace, into the hearts of the faithful, which can never be attempted by human doctrine'.[52] The language used to describe the experience of conversion was often sensual, somatic, sometimes even sexual in its emphasis. The courtier George Zouche was reported to be 'so ravished with the spirit of God' upon reading a copy of Tyndale's *Obedience of a Christian Man* filched from a lady-in-waiting to Anne Boleyn that he could scarcely be prevailed upon to return it.[53] Cranmer spoke of the need to 'allure men to embrace the doctrine of the gospel', an image that appealed also to Brinklow ('repent and believe the Gospel in embracing the same') and to William Turner, who later wrote to Foxe of how he had exhorted his friend Rowland Taylor 'zealously to embrace the

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[49] *AM* 1102; Wyse, *Consolacyon for chrysten people*, G2r.
[50] C. C. Butterworth and A. G. Chester, *George Joye 1495?–1553* (Philadelphia, 1962), 24; Joye, *Letters*, B1v.
[51] John Olde, *A confession of the most auncient and true christen catholike olde belefe* (Emden, 1556), E7r, A2v.
[52] Katherine Parr, *The Lamentacion of a Sinner* (1547), B6r.
[53] *Reformation Narratives*, 52.

evangelical doctrine'.[54] The promise of the gospel absorbed the senses as well as the mind. Latimer recalled in 1552 how he had begun 'to smell the word of God' after an encounter with Bilney.[55] Bale said of Joye's conversion that 'from the purest fonts of the Gospels did he drink the spiritual and wholly undiluted philosophy of Christ, with which he bedewed the parched hearts of many'.[56] The imagery of physical nourishment permeated evangelical discourses on conversion to a remarkable degree. At his trial in 1538, John Lambert insisted that 'the Scripture is the spiritual food and sustenance of man's soul', and others, including Bilney, Tyndale, Joye, Cranmer and Coverdale vividly described the experience of 'tasting' God's holy word.[57] This habitual substitution of 'tasting' for reading/comprehending/believing persisted into the martyrological accounts of a subsequent generation. According to John Foxe the monk Richard Bayfield was one of those who, having spent time in Cambridge, 'tasted so well of good letters' that he could never return to his abbey. In his account of the early career of Martin Luther, Foxe noted that those hearing his sermons 'received good taste of this sweet doctrine' and began to understand the difference between the law and the gospel.[58]

That the experience of receiving the gospel could be one of 'sweetness' is an intriguing pointer. In a discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 with its 'bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang', Eamon Duffy has recently argued that in terms of religious imagery 'sweet' was a quintessentially Catholic word. All-pervasive in the prayers, primers and homilies of the pre-Reformation period, references to the 'sweetness' of Christ and his passion were progressively expunged from Protestant devotional language because of their affective, sentimental associations, and their potential to be distractions from faith.[59] Yet in the reign of Henry VIII evangelicals seem to have had few qualms about this adjective. Years after the event Foxe's correspondent William Maldon

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[54] Ibid., 246; Henry Brinklow, *The Complaynt of Roderyck Mors . . . & the Lamentacyon of a Christen Agaynst the Cyte of London*, ed. J. M. Cowper, EETS extra series 22 (1874), 120; Nicholas Ridley, *Works*, ed. H. Christmas (PS, 1843), 494.

[55] Hugh Latimer, *Sermons*, ed. G. E. Corrie (PS, 1844), 334.

[56] Butterworth and Chester, *George Joye*, 24.

[57] *AM*, 1005, 1116; Trueman, *Luther's Legacy*, 89; Joye, *Letters*, B6r; *Reformation Narratives*, 247; H. C. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (2nd edition, Hamden, CT, 1972), 46.

[58] *AM*, 844, 1021.

[59] Eamon Duffy, 'Remembering Catholicism in Shakespeare's England', a paper given at the conference on 'Catholic England', St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, 27 April 2000. For the ubiquity of 'sweet' in pre-Reformation devotional discourse, see Duffy's magisterial *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), *passim*.

recalled as a young man joining the throng gathered on Sundays in
Chelmsford church in 1538 to hear men reading from the newly sanc-
tioned vernacular bible, 'that glad and sweet tidings of the gospel'.
Despite parental disapproval, the experience made him determined to
learn to read English for himself.[60] At much the same time, a more
socially elevated convert, the courtier Sir Nicholas Carew, was report-
edly giving thanks to God 'that ever he came in the prison of the tower,
where he first savoured the life & sweetness of God's most holy word,
meaning the Bible in English'.[61] By withholding the Bible in English,
charged Nicholas Wyse, the clergy denied people 'the sweet fruit that
they should have had in his scripture', and Joye similarly accused op-
ponents of vernacular scripture of pretending 'that which is sweet to
be bitter'.[62] Tyndale urged hearers of the Word preached to consider
'how sweet a thing the bitter death of Christ is' and to 'feel the goodness
or . . . sweetness' in God's law.[63] The Yorkshire reformer Francis Bigod
contrasted the 'judicial captivity of that babylonical man of Rome' to
'the sweet and soft service' of the gospel.[64] Bilney reported how a sen-
tence discovered by chance in Paul's First Letter to Timothy acted as
a 'most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul'. Thereafter 'the
Scripture began to be more pleasant unto me than the honey or the
honey-comb', with its message that good works done without trust in
Christ were worthless.[65] Katherine Parr was another who found 'pleas-
ant and sweet words' in the New Testament, as, according to a later
acount, was the London grocer John Petyt: 'one of the first that with
Mr. Frith, Bilney, and Tyndale caught a sweetness in God's word'.[66]
Here the reformers might deploy exactly the same kind of imagery as
their religious opponents, such as the conservative Kentish priest in the
early 1540s who, disliking the Pater Noster in English, compared it to
the hard shell of a nut, 'and the Pater Noster in Latin to the sweet
kernel'.[67]

It should occasion no surprise to discover either that the evangelical
concept of conversion borrowed from a range of ideas developed over
the course of the middle ages, or that the language used to describe the
experience drew on a contemporary repertoire of religious imagery. After

[60] *Reformation Narratives*, 348–9.
[61] Edward Hall, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548), 234r.
[62] Wyse, *Consolacyon for chrysten people*, F6v; Joye, *Letters*, B1v.
[63] Trueman, *Luther's Legacy*, 89, 100.
[64] A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York* 1509–1558 (Oxford, 1959), 70.
[65] *AM*, 1005.   [66] Parr, *Lamentacion*, B2v; *Reformation Narratives*, 25.
[67] Peter Marshall, *The Catholic Priesthood and the English Reformation* (Oxford, 1994), 102.

all, 'early evangelicals were late medieval Christians'.[68] The study of the
early Reformation, in England and elsewhere, has undoubtedly suffered
from an anachronistic obsession with the 'origins' of later confessional
movements, and an insufficient interest in or understanding of the extent
to which early evangelicals were shaped within, and emerged from, the
complex religious culture of their own age. Nonetheless, in investigating
the experience of evangelical conversion in the quarter-century follow-
ing Luther's break with the papacy it would be strange to suggest that
we are not somewhere near the 'beginnings of English Protestantism'.
Though it is right to be wary of anachronism and premature confessional
labelling, it is equally valid to suggest that those persecuted as heretics
in the 1520s and 1530s for acting on the imperatives of a scripturally
patterned experience of conversion were something more than slightly
heterodox Catholics punished for indulging an ill-judged religious enthu-
siasm. In the remaining part of this chapter, I want to sharpen the focus
on the ways in which shared understanding of the meanings of conver-
sion contributed towards the formation of subjective religious identities
in sixteenth-century England, and towards the permanence of religious
division.

<center>IV</center>

The evangelical representation of conversion was by no means all
sweetness and light, and nor was the experience of being converted.
Contemporary social scientists characterise conversion as 'a problematic
discontinuity demarcated by distinctive continuous states either side of
the conversion happening'.[69] Or as another modern authority more
succinctly puts it, 'conversion is from and to'.[70] The 'from' of evangelical
conversion narratives, the understanding of the preconversion self, is
an issue that requires further examination if we are to place the phe-
nomenon meaningfully in a context of emergent confessional identities.
    If conversion was typically represented as repentance, a turning to God
and away from sin, then, logically enough, the former life of the convert
was likely to appear in unflattering terms. This is certainly the case with

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[68] B. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1999),
141. See also ibid., 158–160, for the argument (parallel to mine) that early Protestant martyrs
continued a 'medieval monastic vocabulary', and that the terms they used about scripture 'do
not reflect dispassionate encounter with a text'.

[69] R. Ireland, 'Pentecostalism, Conversions and Politics in Brazil', *Religion* 25 (1995), 141.

[70] *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. E. Fahlbusch et al. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), i. 683. See also
A. J. Kreilsheimer, *Conversion* (1980), 157.

one of the earliest of English evangelical autobiographical fragments, 'the author's prologue' in *The myrrour or lokynge glasse of lyfe* (1532) by the London publisher John Gough. The mirror in question was 'the holy words of God, by the writing of the evangelists and of St Paul . . . and the more I looked in this most pure glass, the more knowledge I had of my foul spotted soul'. Gough described himself as 'one that hath lived many years in the enormity and ambition of vainglory'.[71] A more expansive treatment of the same theme was provided in Katherine Parr's *The Lamentacion of a Sinner*, composed probably in the winter of 1545–6, and published in the first year of Edward VI's reign.[72] Much of the treatise was taken up with reflection on an 'evil and wretched former life', Parr feeling 'forced and constrained with my heart and words, to confess and declare to the world, how ingrate, negligent, unkind, and stubborn, I have been to God my creator'.[73]

This postulation of an unregenerate former self, it should be said, was hardly an unfamiliar theme in the religious culture of the later Middle Ages. Among the saints, Paul and Mary Magdalene had long exemplified the possibility of sharp contrast between the 'before' and 'after' of conversion. It was also at the centre of that *locus classicus* of conversion narratives, *The Confessions* of St Augustine, and those not familiar with the original might hear a potted version preached from *The Golden Legend*, recounting how the saint had once been a 'wicked slave of evil desires'.[74] Medieval hagiography also served up the formerly wicked lives of a number of less eminent saints, including St Pelagia, St Brice, and St Thais, courtesan.[75] It is worth noting, too, that Katherine Parr's *Lamentacion* was firmly rooted in a late medieval genre, looking back past Marguerite of Navarre's *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* to the late fifteenth-century *Mirror of Gold to the Sinful Soul* of the monk Dionysius Carthusianus, translated into English in 1507 by Henry VIII's grandmother, Lady Margaret Beaufort.[76] Yet in evangelical sources of the early-to-mid-sixteenth century, there was a distinctive and decisive shaping element at work in the process we might call the invention of an 'other' self. Increasingly, past 'wickedness' was understood in terms of doctrine rather than personal morality. Gough stated that he had lived a life of vainglory 'judging myself a good Christian man', and in railing against 'the great enormity of sin reigning in the common people' he had in mind their disdain

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[71] J[ohn] G[ough], *Here begynneth a lytell treatyse called the myrrour or lokynge glasse of lyfe* (1532), A2v.
[72] S. E. James, *Kateryn Parr: The Making of a Queen* (Aldershot, 1999), 234–6.
[73] Parr, *Lamentacion*, A1r.　　[74] *The Golden Legend*, ii. 117.　　[75] Ibid., 230, 301, 234.
[76] James, *Kateryn Parr*, 235–7.

for God's Word 'and the pronouncer or speaker thereof'.[77] Katherine Parr was even more emphatic: 'I would have covered my sins with the pretence of holiness, I called superstition, godly meaning, and true holiness, error . . . the blood of Christ was not reputed by me sufficient for to wash me from the filth of my sins.'[78]

It has been customary to think of individual trajectories from 'Catholicism' to 'Protestantism' following an arc passing through such points as 'humanism', 'anticlericalism' and 'disenchantment'. In many cases it may indeed have been so.[79] But those reformers who left first-person narratives of their spiritual odysseys seem almost to have vied with each other in stressing the depth and extent of their commitment to the worst type of unreformed Catholicism.[80] John Bale, for example, claimed to have been 'a most obstinate papist' (*obstinatissimus papista*) before the break with Rome, while an early anonymous biographer of Cranmer laid great emphasis on how in his youth at Cambridge the archbishop had been 'nouselled in the grossest kind of sophistry, logic, philosophy moral and natural . . . chiefly in the dark riddles and quiddities of Duns and other subtle questionists'.[81] In a letter to Heinrich Bullinger of January 1546, the exiled John Hooper bitterly repented the time when 'like a brute beast . . . I have been a slave to my own lusts'. These wicked impulses seem to have been spiritual rather than sexual ones: 'I had begun to blaspheme God by impious worship and all manner of idolatry, following the evil ways of my forefathers, before I rightly understood what God was'.[82] Writing in Edward's reign, another Henrician evangelical, Thomas Becon, included himself in a collective confession of past guilt: 'How ran we from post to pillar, from stock to stone, from idol to idol, from place to place, to seek remission of our sins . . . How were we bewitched to believe, that in observing the pope's ceremonies there was everlasting salvation, and in neglecting them eternal damnation.'[83] The reformer who seems to have returned to the theme most insistently, however, was

[77] Gough, *Myrrour or lookynge glasse of lyfe*, A2v-4r.   [78] Parr, *Lamentacion*, A2v, A4v.

[79] In his recantation of 1528, for example, the Augustinian friar Thomas Topley warned all Christians to 'beware of consenting to Erasmus's Fables [*The Colloquies*], for by consenting to them, they have caused me to shrink in my faith'. See *AM*, 1047.

[80] A point noted by J. J. Scarisbrick, who remarked how converts to Protestantism did not suggest their conversion had been preceded by slow disillusionment, but rather 'came as a sudden release from an elaborate way of life which, up to the moment when scales fell from eyes, had enjoyed wholehearted commitment'. See *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984), 56.

[81] Cited in Richard Rex, 'John Bale, Geoffrey Downes and Jesus College', *JEH* 49 (1998), note 491; *Reformation Narratives*, 218–19.

[82] *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation*, ed. H. Robinson (2 vols., PS, 1846–7), i. 33–4.

[83] Thomas Becon, *The Catechism . . . with Other Pieces*, ed. J. Ayre (PS, 1844), 413–14.

Hugh Latimer. In a letter to Sir Edward Baynton in December 1531, Latimer confessed that:

I have thought in times past, that the pope, Christ's vicar, hath been Lord of all the world, as Christ is; so that if he should have deprived the king of his crown, or you of the lordship of Bromeham, it had been enough; for he could do no wrong . . . that the pope's dispensations of pluralities of benefices, and absence from the same, had discharged consciences before God . . . that the pope could have spoiled purgatory at his pleasure with a word of his mouth . . . that if I had been a friar, and in a cowl, I could not have been damned, nor afraid of death; and by occasion of the same, I have been minded many times to have been a friar, namely when I was sore sick and diseased: now I abhor my superstitious foolishness . . . I have thought in times past that divers images of saints could have holpen me, and done me much good, and delivered me of my diseases . . . It were too long to tell you what blindness I have been in, and how long it were ere I could forsake such folly, it was so corporate in me.[84]

There was perhaps an element of calculation in Latimer's frank confession. He was under investigation by Bishop John Stokesley of London, and denied the bishop's right to search out the secrets of his conscience, slyly noting that 'men think that my lord himself hath thought in times past, that by God's law a man might marry his brother's wife'. But in a subsequent letter Latimer vehemently defended himself against the charge of some of Baynton's friends who 'think that I made a lie, when I said that I have thought in times past that the pope had been lord of the world'.[85] Years later, in a sermon of 1552, Latimer recalled that he had once been 'as obstinate a papist as any was in England, insomuch that when I should be made bachelor of divinity, my whole oration went against Philip Melanchthon and against his opinions'.[86]

Whether any of these fragments of personal history represent totally reliable accounts of an individual's lived experience is of course a distinctly moot point. They should probably be regarded as part of the construction or 'fictionalisation' of conversion experience, something which heightens rather than reduces their value and interest. Then, as now, religious 'conversion' acquires its name and meaning only through a process of subsequent reflection, and contemporary sociological studies identify distinct elements of stereotyping in the accounts provided by religious converts. The paradigm of sinfulness-conversion-regeneration seems particularly prominent among recruits to modern

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[84] Hugh Latimer, *Sermons and Remains*, ed. G. E. Corrie (PS, 1845), 332–3.
[85] Ibid., 333, 348.   [86] Latimer, *Sermons*, 334.

Protestant sects.[87] Early sixteenth-century evangelicals were perhaps especially predisposed to (re)interpret their experience in this way. The search for validating biblical prototypes provided the epitome of instantaneous conversion in the experience of St Paul, and the widely recognised tendency among early moderns to construct their world-view in terms of binary oppositions may have served to sharpen an artificially antithetical juxtaposition of 'before' and 'after'. No doubt things were frequently less tidy in reality. We know that some converts to evangelical ideas in the 1520s and 1530s were not stout papists but long-standing Lollard sympathisers, and it is probable that many converts stumbled gradually rather than leaped suddenly to occupy new ground – needing, like the Winchester scholar William Ford, to be 'at length with much ado brought from the popish doctrine'.[88]

Yet there are few hints of caution, confusion, or gradualism in the accounts that have been bequeathed to us. A common thread was the sense of a profound ontological change. Evangelicals spoke of eyes being opened, of the 'veil of Moses' being lifted, of being clothed 'in a new garment'.[89] The idea of being 'born again', still prevalent in modern religious discourse, was used as well: one friar, a protégé of Latimer, was styling himself 'Two-Year-Old' in 1536.[90] There were sound theological reasons for representing things in this way. Being able to perceive the truth in religion was not the exercise of an active personal choice, but a receptiveness to the initiating action of the Holy Spirit: conversion was God's doing, not man's. The verb 'to convert' was itself sometimes used as a transitive rather than intransitive one, with God as the subject. Thus George Joye urged in 1544 that gospellers should pray to God for their persecutors 'that he would for Christ's sake have mercy upon them and convert them'.[91] There was clearly a fear in some quarters that to recognise the convert's own agency was to risk readmitting that 'works righteousness' against which the reformers had set their face so firmly. In a treatise on justification published in 1543, the Gloucestershire gentleman and lay reformer Richard Tracy denied that God gave justifying

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[87] T. F. O'Dea, *The Sociology of Religion* (New Jersey, 1966), 61–3.

[88] Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 10; *Reformation Narratives*, 29.

[89] Parr, *Lamentacion*, B4v, B5v; PRO SP 1 / 115, 31r (*LP* XII (i) 212); Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, 417.

[90] Susan Wabuda, ' "Fruitful Preaching" in the Diocese of Worcester: Bishop Hugh Latimer and his Influence 1535–1539', *Religion and the English People 1500–1640*, ed. Eric Carlson (Kirksville, MO, 1998), 68.

[91] George Joye, *A present consolacion for the sufferers of persecution for ryghtwyseness* (Antwerp, 1544), G4v.

faith to any man because of a virtuous disposition to repentance that he saw in him. Rather, he insisted (with St James) that 'every perfect gift is from above' and remarked on the absurdity of praising for its swift flying through the air a thrown stone 'whose nature is to lie still, if it be not removed'.[92] Joye emphasised that 'Paul as he was going to persecute Christ's Church was smitten down a murderer and rose again a justified man, which yet had done no good works'.[93] Katherine Parr claimed to have discovered that 'mine own power and strength could not help me, & that I was in the Lord's hand, even as the clay is in the potter's hand'.[94], In describing the conversion of a former conservative in 1545, John Bale laid all the emphasis on God's action: 'we laud that heavenly lord, which thus of mere pity and mercy hath found out his almost perished sheep, laid him upon his shoulders, and brought him again to his fold'.[95] The insistence in a modern reference work that 'conversion is a conscious act on the part of the subject, not an event passively experienced' would have seemed grossly presumptuous to all of these writers.[96]

Yet despite the emphasis on divine initiative in the conversion process, evangelical converts did not usually claim to resemble St Paul in being literally struck down by a blinding light from heaven as they went about their papist business. Conversion narratives featured a clear interest in instrumentality, in the mechanisms and means that God had employed to open the converts' hearts, and show them the error of their ways. Indeed, the characteristic fashioning of these narratives around the principle of fairly sudden transformation tended to accentuate the significance of stimuli, triggers and catalysts. Not surprisingly, a very common theme was the effect of exposure for the first time to vernacular scripture. For evangelicals the medium was the message here, the New Testament both imparting the doctrinal verity of justification by faith, and at the same time bringing about the possibility of experiential encounter with the risen Christ, the eternal 'Word' of God. Examples of subjects of Henry VIII supposedly converted by reading scripture could be multiplied without great difficulty, from the Essex Lollard John Tyball, confessing in 1528 how he fell into 'errors and heresies' by reading the evangelists and the Epistles of Peter and Paul in English, to the Lincolnshire gentlewoman Anne Askew, converted

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[92] Richard Tracy, *The profe and declaration of thys proposition: fayth only iustifieth* (1543), A7r-v.
[93] Joye, *Letters*, B6r.   [94] Parr, *Lamentacion* D3r-v.
[95] John Bale, *A Mysterye of inyquyte contayned within the heretycall Genealogye of Ponce Pantolabus* (Antwerp, 1545), A3r-v.
[96] *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Exeter, 1974), 259.

'by oft reading of the sacred Bible'.[97] Books other than the text of scripture itself were sometimes credited with bringing about conversions (though presumably people taking the risk of reading forbidden heretical works must often have done so with some kind of predisposition to accept their arguments). John Foxe claimed that, in addition to the New Testament, it was Tyndale's works, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* and *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, that had persuaded Richard Bayfield; and the *Wicked Mammon* was also claimed to have converted the London leather seller John Tewkesbury.[98] Luther's works were identified by the temporarily apostate evangelical William Barlow in 1531 as the means whereby he had been 'enticed unto their faction'; and similar confessions, or boasts, were made by John Lambert and William Roper.[99] Another member of the More circle, Sir Thomas's brother-in-law, John Rastell, had engaged in a literary disputation with the young reformer John Frith over the question of purgatory, and was converted to the cause of radical reform in the last few years of his life by reading Frith's rejoinder.[100] Rowland Taylor was reportedly converted by the Lutheran tract *Unio Dissidentium*; and, without specifying titles, Nicholas Shaxton confessed during his recantation sermon of August 1546 that his sacramentarian views were the result of reading 'heretical books of English'.[101]

It was sometimes suggested that the suffering of persecuted evangelicals subverted the intention of the persecutors by inspiring others to find the truth. George Joye suggested in 1544 that 'our innocent blood shed for the gospel shall preach it with more fruit . . . then ever did our mouths and pens'.[102] There must have been an element of wishful thinking here, but John Bale claimed in 1545 to have met several persons in Colchester who were 'converted from your papism unto true repentance' by the steadfast demeanour at the stake of the Anabaptist Peter Franke.[103] He also claimed that a great number of those present were converted by the

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[97] John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials* (3 vols., 1721), I (ii). 35; Anne Askew and John Bale, *The lattre examinacyon, of Anne Askew* (Wesel, 1547), 15r.

[98] *AM*, 1021, 1024.

[99] William Barlow, *A Dialogue Describing the Originall Ground of these Lutheran Faccions*, ed. J. R. Lunn (1897), 70; Harpsfield, *More*, 85; *AM*, 1102.

[100] John Frith, 'A Disputation of Purgatory', *The Work of John Frith*, ed. N. T. Wright (Oxford, 1978), 211. See the introduction by A. J. Geritz to his edition of Rastell's *The Pastyme of People and a New Boke of Purgatory* (New York, 1985).

[101] Ridley, *Works*, 494; Charles Wriothesley, *A Chronicle of England during the Reigns of the Tudors*, ed. W. Hamilton, vol. 1 (Camden Society n.s. 11, 1875), 170.

[102] Joye, *Present consolation*, B4v.

[103] Bale, *Mysterye of inyquyte*, 54v.

burning of Anne Askew and her companions in 1546, though his allusions in this context to the centurion acknowledging Christ's divinity at the crucifixion should alert us to the elements of narrative structuring and stock topoi so clearly present in Reformation martyrology.[104]

Alongside books and burnings, it was brethren who were most commonly recognised as the secondary causes in God's plan to bring about the conversion of an individual. The word 'converter' was even used by contemporaries in this sense, an evangelical in Northamptonshire being reported to the authorities in May 1546 as 'a common converter of the people from the laws and ordinances of the Church'.[105] Pedigrees and genealogies of conversion are recurrent features of the narratives in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. John Frith's road to martyrdom began when 'he fell into knowledge and acquaintance with William Tyndale, through whose instructions he first received into his heart the seed of the gospel'. Thomas Bilney is said to have 'converted Dr Barnes to the gospel of Jesus Christ our Saviour' along with a host of others.[106] But the theme was already well established by the time Foxe began his compilation. From the perspective of Edward VI's reign, John Bale attributed his conversion to the persuasions of Thomas Lord Wentworth; and Hugh Latimer was in no doubt that 'Master Bilney, or rather Saint Bilney . . . was the instrument whereby God called me to knowledge; for I may thank him, next to God, for that knowledge that I have in the word of God'. After Latimer had delivered an aggressive sermon against the teaching of Melancthon, Bilney had come to him requesting Latimer to hear his confession, by which 'I learned more than before in many years . . . and forsook the school-doctors and such fooleries'.[107] This, almost certainly, is the context for the sentiment (unusual in an evangelical) that Latimer is reported to have voiced in a sermon of 1536: 'if ever I had amendment of my sinful life the occasion thereof came by auricular confession'.[108] In his turn Latimer became identified by others as the cause of their entry into the gospel. The conversions of John Cardmaker and John Tyrel were attributed to Latimer's preaching; and John Olde was another proud to acknowledge 'the reverend father of blessed memory Hugh Latimer' as the 'right worthy instrument' for opening to him the true Christian faith.[109] William

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[104] John Bale, *Select Works*, ed. H. Christmas (PS, 1849), 143, 243. On this theme, see *John Foxe and the English Reformation*, ed. D. Loades (Aldershot, 1997).

[105] A. G. Dickens, *Late Monasticism and the Reformation* (1994), 142.

[106] *AM*, 1031; *AM* (1563), 479.   [107] Fairfield, *John Bale*, 33; Latimer, *Sermons*, 334–5.

[108] PRO SP 1/104, 202r (*LP* X 1201).

[109] J. H. Fines, *A Biographical Register of Early English Protestants*, Part 2 (2 unpaginated vols., unpublished typescript 1981–1985), no. T3; *AM*, 1043; Olde, *Confession of the . . . olde belefe*, A2v.

Turner dedicated his *Preservative, or triacle, agaynst the poyson of Pelagius* (1552) to this 'most steadfast, godly, and true preacher of God's word', adding that 'first in Cambridge about 20 years ago, ye took great pains to put men from their evil works' and that 'this foundation of God's word once laid, we that were your disciples had much to do in Cambridge, after your departing from us'.[110] Though it involved a repudiation of past beliefs, and sometimes of friendships and family ties, evangelical conversion was not typically represented as a solitary or atomising process. The construction of a conversion experience was frequently cemented and buttressed by perceived personal obligations and solidarities, an aspect strengthened further when, as so often, the facilitator of one's conversion later died a martyr's death.

V

The Swiss historian Peter Blickle has confessed that 'I do not know what motives drove people from the Roman Church and to the reformers, nor does anyone else know it. Why did people around 1515 want to see the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, but around 1525 demand to hear the Word of God? No one has produced a plausible answer to this question, much less an adequate one.'[111] This chapter makes no claims to have solved Blickle's conundrum. Questions of deep-rooted motivation in religious conversion are individually opaque, and collectively present a kaleidoscope of shifting interpretative patterns. What is asserted here, however, is that for those who did follow this path, the sense of undergoing a profound change, of experiencing a 'conversion', and of being able to rationalise and, to an extent, systematise that experience, was a profoundly important aspect of a new religious and social existence. It was perhaps the most significant factor giving shape to an emergent 'Protestantism', in the years before that phenomenon found either institutional structures or an agreed set of descriptive labels.

   In a classic study of conversion in the classical and early Christian world, A. D. Nock wrote that 'even when the fact of conversion appears wholly sudden and not led up to by a gradual process of gaining conviction, even when the convert may in all good faith profess that the beliefs which have won his sudden assent are new to him, there is a

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[110] W. R. D. Jones, *William Turner* (1988), 9.
[111] Cited by R. N. Swanson, 'The Pre-Reformation Church', *The Reformation World*, ed. Andrew Pettegree (2000), 9.

background of concepts to which a stimulus can give new life'.[112] This observation certainly applies to the patterns of evangelical conversion we have noted under Henry VIII. Early evangelicals were formed in a religious culture which esteemed and espoused conversion as an ideal of Christian life. Nock also observed, with respect to the conversion of Augustine, that it did not represent progression in a continuous line: 'it is like a chemical process in which the addition of a catalytic agent produces a reaction for which all the elements were already present'.[113] In early Tudor England that catalytic agent was the solifidian theology of the Continental reformers and their English followers. The characteristic evangelical conversion was the powerful synthesis of a profound yearning for personal religious renewal, with a plausible theological explanation of how that yearning could be made effectual within the subjective experience of conversion itself. Historians who work with the phenomenon of religion in early modern England seem sometimes to want to keep the theology and sociology of the topic apart, like white and noncolourfast garments in the wash-cycles of meaningful historical explanation. But in this case we should perhaps let the colours run together. The 'conversion experience' of early English evangelicals was a dye finely compounded of social, cultural *and* theological pigments, and it made an indelible mark on the appearance of a distinctive Protestant identity.

[112] A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933), 8.
[113] Ibid., 266.